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C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 000608

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON CU

SUBJECT: RAUL'S JULY 26TH SPEECH A NON-EVENT THIS YEAR

REF: A. HAVANA 592

1B. HAVANA 593

Classified By: COM Jonathan Farrar for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) The evening of July 26th, in celebration of the 55th anniversary of the attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago, which launched the Castro revolution in Cuba, Raul Castro addressed an assembled group of about 10,000 selected supporters gathered at the former barracks, now converted into a school. Serving as a backdrop for the podium was a huge poster featuring an image of Fidel and Cuban national hero Jose Marti with the words "The Victory of Ideas" underneath. Anyone who thought Raul might use the occasion to announce new or substantive ideas came away disappointed. Instead, he gave a comparatively short (less than an hour) speech that sounded like a small town mayor giving a rundown of civic improvements at a monthly town council meeting. With the local audience in mind, he cited all of the infrastructure work the GOC is doing in and around Santiago, including ongoing cleanup from Tropical Storm Noel, which took place in October 2007. Raul also praised the work of Fidel and all of those patriots who had sacrificed so much to make Cuba what it is today (The victory of ideas perhaps? Not even rhetorical evidence of that in his speech.). In a nod towards his apparently genuine interest in decentralization, he quipped to nervous laughter that if the Santiagueros did not like the way the projects were turning out, they should take their complaints to the Minister of Public Works and to the provincial and municipal chiefs, whom he identified by name. They squirmed in their seats. He once again warned that Cuba is facing increasing challenges to its economy and that only hard work and discipline will see it through.

12. (C) He referred to the social security and land distribution programs he had discussed in his July 11 address to the National Assembly. He did not announce anything new on these issues, adding only that it appears that the government needs to work harder to get out the word on the Social Security plan since many people apparently did not understand what he had said in his speech. He praised the military and said it is more ready than ever to repel the expected invasion (from the US). Aside from that allusion, his only mention of us was to blame the world food crisis on US biofuels policy.

13. (C) There were some notable style differences. As noted, he spent virtually no time attacking the US, and blamed the collapse of the Soviet Union--and specifically the so-called "Special Period" in the early 1990s--for the fact that eastern Cuba remains so backward. Also, where in the past there was a clear hierarchy and he and Fidel sat apart on the dais, for this speech no one sat on the dais. Instead, until he spoke Raul was seated with the members of the Politburo in

the first row of the audience.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: After the lack of substance in the July 11 speech and the absence of the usual buzz about potential change announcements prior to the 26th, we were not surprised by the outcome of Raul's address. Nor does it seem likely at this point that there will be significant announcements in the near future--and possibly not for the rest of the year. The reaction of Cubans with whom we have spoken has been one of resigned frustration. As opportunities to announce substantive reforms come and go with nothing of note proposed, Cubans seem increasingly discouraged that things will get better in the short to medium term. The most profound reaction to the lack of substance in the speech may be measured by the numbers who decide to take to the sea over the next 3 months while the weather remains relatively calm.

FARRAR